

## Women In Trucking Board Member Maggie Peterson in Wall Street Journal

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Women in Trucking Are Taking on Men For Bragging Rights

Linda Courtney Avoids Obstacles in Competition; 'We Can Still Be Ladies'

By CHRISTOPHER CONKEY

MINNEAPOLIS -- Competitors for the National Truck Driving Championship get one pressure-packed chance to maneuver a rig they have never seen through an obstacle course they have never attempted. They must do it in front of judges and hundreds of screaming fans.

For Linda Courtney, a nervous first-time contestant at this year's event, there was another challenge: Competing as a woman in a male specialty.

Ms. Courtney, a tall, 35-year-old Montanan with wavy blond hair, was here in Minneapolis after defeating her male rivals at a state-level tournament in June.

In years past, Ms. Courtney would have been pretty much alone in a sea of men, in battling for a top spot in the profession's premier test of driving skills and safety awareness. But this year, with more and more women in trucking, she is one of a record seven women to have won state tournaments.

The goal for all the contestants is to win something that attracts attention at truck stops everywhere: a golden belt buckle, the prize given to the winner of each of the tournament's eight categories of trucks. To win, contestants must labor through exams and inspections. Then, they get just one chance to maneuver trucks stretching as long as 75 feet through the secret driving test, a U-shaped obstacle course littered with gates, cones -- and rubber ducks -- that can't be touched.

Sitting behind a curtain waiting her turn, Ms. Courtney listened to the cheers and the sounds of diesel engines accelerating in low gear in the arena. "I had butterflies," Ms. Courtney recalled later. "I'm lucky I didn't stop and jump out of the truck."

In the 70-year history of the contest, no woman had advanced further than Carol Craig, a Viking Freight System driver who placed third in the Straight Truck division in 1993. Trucking remains a predominantly male business, and the seven women at this year's championships stood out among the 370 men competing.

Things are gradually changing, as the share of women truckers has grown to 5.2% last year, from 0.6% in 1972, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Technological advances like power steering and electric pallet jacks have eased the physical demands of many trucking jobs. And a growing labor shortage is leading trucking companies to boost pay packages and expand recruiting efforts to attract new drivers, including women.

There were other reasons to hope that women would do better this year. Jackie Spangler, a tank-truck driver in Baltimore for Exxon Mobil Corp. who had outscored all her Maryland rivals to become the state's grand champion in 2006, was making her second straight appearance. Linda Nodland of Leavitt's Freight Service in Oregon had qualified for the fifth time, having placed 12th her last trip.

Janet Hoard, a first-timer to nationals who won rookie of the year honors in Kentucky, confidently predicted that she and her two female FedEx colleagues would take the top three spots in the straight truck division -- for trucks that have no separation between cab and trailer.

Ms. Courtney climbed behind the wheel of a truck for the first time at age 15, and started driving professionally in 1999. "I'm used to being in male-dominated fields to begin with," she says, noting earlier passages through ranching, auto mechanics and welding. "I try hard to be accepted in a man's world."

Driving for privately held Watkins & Shepard Trucking Inc., she pilots a seven-axle, 26-wheel tractor-trailer loaded with 66,000 pounds of paper used to make cardboard on a 480-mile route between Missoula and Calgary, Alberta.

Ms. Courtney says she gets “special treatment” as a female driver and rarely runs into chauvinistic or threatening male behavior, although she took precautions early in her career not to leave her truck at night or linger at truck stops. “I’ve always tried to make it so there was no reason for me to have problems,” she said.

Several of the other women said they still get occasional harassment from male drivers and say that truck stops could do more to accommodate their needs for showers, separate restrooms and laundry facilities. But a big priority is just proving that ordinary women can be truckers.

“We can still be ladies and get this job done,” said Lisa Jones, a driver in South Carolina for the Piggly Wiggly supermarket chain, pointing out her hoop earrings. “I get my nails done!” said Maggie Peterson, a longtime trucker who was overseeing the Women in Trucking booth at the competition.

In Minneapolis in August, however, the big question was whether any of the women could claim a golden belt buckle. To qualify, each competitor had driven accident-free for all of last year and had won the state-level tournament.

After devouring steak and eggs, the competitors filed into separate waiting rooms, where they built Lego trucks and shouted cheers to combat nervousness. Eventually, they headed to the arena, where they were seated behind curtains until their moment arrived. Then, one by one, they climbed behind the wheel of a gleaming new truck and set off.

The first few women to tackle the course, which featured six “problems” worth 50 points apiece, failed to shine. Linda Tierney of FedEx, one of the most experienced drivers, stumbled on the first problem -- weaving through pairs of gates positioned at different angles. She finished with a score of 145 out of a possible 300. Her rookie colleagues drove anxiously and didn’t fare as well.

Ms. Jones’s manager hid behind a column when the Piggly Wiggly driver entered the course, hoping she wouldn’t see him and get tense. But Ms. Jones struggled and scored 115.

Then Ms. Courtney was up. The lone female in the five-axle group, she passed unblemished through the offset gates and scored a respectable 35 on the second problem, a long reverse where drivers ease their trailers as close as possible to a barricade without touching it.

On the next two challenges, where drivers had to launch into a sharp right turn in front of the fans while passing within inches of oddly placed ducks the judges called roadkill, Ms. Courtney maneuvered too quickly and failed to score. She finished at 140.

Meanwhile, several male competitors scored well over 200.

The next morning, the veteran Ms. Nodland backed her flatbed into the second barricade. On the first problem, Ms. Spangler brushed her tanker against a gate.

In the end, all the female contestants finished toward the middle of the pack. Alphonso Lewis, a Roadway driver from Alabama, won a golden belt buckle and went on to secure the grand championship for most points scored overall, marking a different milestone: He was the first African-American to claim the title.

Said Ms. Courtney: “I’m sure I’ll be back.”